

What's the Risk of Teens Drinking?

Written by: Dodie Huff-Fletcher, Ph.D.

Prevention Division of Seven Counties Services, Inc.

As a parent there are so many risks from which we try to protect our teens. Alcohol use is one of those risks that can be hard to understand. There has been a good deal of study on this issue and there are several risks. Aside from the fact that underage drinking is illegal, it poses a high risk to both the individual and society.

- **Drinking and Driving**—Most parents know that automobile crashes are the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20. The rate of fatal crashes among alcohol-involved drivers between 16 and 20 years old is more than twice the rate for alcohol-involved drivers ages 21 and older.
- **Suicide**—Teen suicide comes to a parent's mind when their teen show signs of depression and stress. Both contribute to suicide, the third leading cause of death among people between the ages of 14 and 25. There is also a strong link to underage drinking. In one study, 37 percent of eighth grade females who drank heavily reported attempting suicide, compared with 11 percent who did not drink.
- **Sexual Assault**— Many parents are concerned that their teen will be a victim of sexual assault. Sexual assault, including rape, occurs most commonly among women in late adolescence and early adulthood, usually within the context of a date. In one survey, approximately 10 percent of female high school students reported having been raped. Research suggests that alcohol use by the offender, the victim or both, increase the likelihood of sexual assault by a male acquaintance.
- **High-Risk Sex**— There is also the danger of high-risk sex. Research has associated adolescent alcohol use with high-risk sex (for example, multiple partners or unprotected sex). The consequences of high-risk sex in this age group can include unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. According to a recent study, the link between high-risk sex and drinking is affected by the quantity of alcohol consumed. The probability of sexual intercourse is increased by drinking amounts of alcohol sufficient to impair judgment.
- **Deadly Alcohol Poisoning** - Though most college drinkers would deny it, young people do die solely from drinking. In 1995, 318 people ages 15 to 24 died from alcohol poisoning alone, many of them after a night binge at college. At the University of Virginia, a tradition that has seniors drinking a fifth of hard liquor at the final game of the football season (so-called "Fourth-year Fifth") has killed 18 students since 1990. (3)

Knowing the risks of teen alcohol use may help you when talking with your teen about the dangers of drinking and the need for them to abstain. You can find more information by contacting the Seven Counties Services Regional Prevention Center at 502-589-8600 or www.sevencounties.org and click on "prevention" under the "our services" tab.

If you suspect or know your teen is using alcohol or other drugs, you can contact the Early Intervention Program (EIP), an assessment and educational program for youth 13-17 years of age, at vserrano@sevencounties.org, or call Vicki Serrano, Prevention Specialist, at 502-439-9699.

Sources

British Medical Association BMA, article Alcohol and Young People, Health 1999

(2) Prevention Alert, Vol. 5 Number 6 May 10, 2002,
ncadi.samhsa.gov/govpubs/prevalert/v5/2.aspx

(3) Author: Kattie Payne, RN, PhD Last updated September 9, 2002, copyright 1995-2004, Healthwise, Incorporated, P. O. Box 1989, Boise, ID 83701.